

Hopeless

by ScarlettStar1

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Summary: A collection of random images and ideas and what ifs that maybe will make a story in the end. . . Everything is disclaimed, as always. And your comments are received with much gratitude.
xox.

1. Shifted

She pulls her hood over her head as she walks the shop-lined street. It looks like rain.

Ever since her pregnancy and subsequent stillbirth of the baby, she's been different. It's like all of the pieces and parts of her soul were shifted and shaken along with her hormones. Like someone took her apart like a pocket watch, put all the little gears and pins into a tiny silken pouch and shook it up.

She's left bare with nothing but a pale face. Time stands still. There is no need for time. All of the days that turned to weeks and grew into months while the baby was inside of her are over and gone. There is no need for time to tell her anything anymore, because all it possibly could tell her is how long her womb has been emptied of its sacred contents with that menacing tick, tick, tick.

She has no need for time. Everything stopped the minute she held that tiny, fragile body in her arms and felt its pulse slow and stop. Truly at 19 weeks, it was a miracle the heart beat outside of her at all. It was a blessing and a curse to press her lips to its velvet, violet crown and anoint it with her tears.

They tell her that in addition to the grief, she could also be experiencing the hormonal shifts of perinatal depression and anxiety.

But it is not that.

She feels nothing.

Rage has frozen her heart. Despair has made her entirely numb. She prepares to work like a robot, oblivious to the gazes and sighs around her. She needs to work. She needs to catch and kill and conquer.

She is, afterall, a warrior.

If there is one gift that son of a bitch Reddington gave her, it was the case that brought to light the special little whorls and hooks of DNA that make her special, fierce, and savage. She will use this to her advantage.

He may have disappeared, but she will find him. She has learned a thing or two over the past two years, and she will use this knowledge like a scholar to hunt him down and do to him what she should have done months ago when she still had the chance.

When her baby still had a chance.

If only she'd had three or four more weeks. There would have been hope.

He robbed her of hope, and she would make him pay.

She grits her teeth as she ducks into the pawn shop as it starts to rain in a sudden, steady downpour.

2. Collecting

He descends into the cavernous basement of the building. He walks between the well-dressed man who leads him down, and Dembe who follows behind. It is cooler below the ground and he nestles deeper into his cashmere overcoat, violating but momentarily his steely demeanor.

The well-dressed man leads him into the vault. Keys are turned. A safe-deposit box is extracted from a wall and placed on a table before him.

"I'll leave you to it," says the well-dressed man.

Red turns to the small coffin-like container. He unbuttons his overcoat, and reaches into the breast pocket of his jacket to extract an ancient looking key. He pauses, his hands poised above the box, feeling as though he is doing something akin to grave robbing, down there in the cool underbelly of the bank.

He's always loved Vienna. The music, palaces, women. It has always been a trip for art and romance. 'Not this time,' he thinks and sighs.

He grits his teeth as he plunges the key into the box's skeletal orifice.

Dembe comes up behind him. The bodyguard, who never misses a thing, must have heard Red's exhalation. Perhaps he had also seen Red shiver in his coat on the way down the stairs. Perhaps he could sense the

accelerated heartbeat pounding away beneath the brushed cotton of his shirt.

"Raymond," he says softly. "You do not have to do this. There are other ways."

Ignoring him, Red turns the key with a quaint click and opens the tomb of the safe deposit box. He extricates the contents with one single sweep of his hand, pocketing it swiftly inside the depths of his overcoat.

Ignoring Dembe's plea, Red growls, "Let's go."

Faithfully, Dembe follows him back up the stairs. Both of their faces are impassive as they climb back up into the warmth of a golden, Viennese afternoon.

3. Everything

He extends his arms and takes both of Samar's hands in his own, greeting her warmly enough. But his face is drawn and gray. He looks wanting for sleep and hydration, she thinks. He's probably been up for days. Drinking. Smoking. Pacing the wrathful corridors of his mind.

"Samar," he utters. She notes that he has used her first name as opposed to the more formal "Agent Navabi" with which he usually greets her. His voice usually bounces on the last syllable of her last name, as though he enjoys the way it sounds. But today he has dispensed with both formalities and humor. Recent events have made them familiar, if not casual. "I trust you are well. We don't have much time."

He wants to ask. She can sense the question in his entire body, aching and awkward. She takes mercy on him.

"Physically, she is recovering," she says, trying to sound reassuring. "Her doctors say she is in good shape and there is no reason why she couldn't try again in the future."

He grunts at this with a nod of his head. He turns on his heel and walks the span of the narrow aisle of books. The smell of a library has always brought him comfort, if not joy. Pages and pages of knowledge and imagination radiating their warm aroma of time and space. It's an organic smell, like soil. It's not like a department store where artificial concoctions offend the nose, or in a cafe where the mingling of delicacies is utterly distracting. As he turns and strides back towards Samar, he catches the musk of her perfume emanating from the "V" of flesh where her jacket and blouse are open. The scent draws his attention to her collar bones and the slight peek of her cleavage.

"Reddington," she says, snapping him back to the aisle of books. "She blames you." Her voice is that of a surgeon. It is completely calm, unalarming. And yet it slices into him with precision. He appreciates this quality of hers, despite the exquisite pain it brings. It was one of the reasons he chose her for the task at hand, one of the reasons he is certain of his trust for the former Mossad operative. She continues. "I haven't figured out what she is planning, yet. But

there is a plan. Of that I am certain."

"I would expect no less from my Lizzie." He grumbles this truth with clenched fists at his sides.

"I'm afraid she is not 'your Lizzie' any longer," Samar replies. Her tone is bland enough, but her eyebrow is raised in an almost submissive manner. She feels the need to let him know this information, but she is not certain how it will be received.

He looks up, eyebrows raised to match hers, his mouth opened as though surprised. But he's not surprised. He knows all of this. He did not need to risk a meeting with Samar to learn that Lizzie has been damaged beyond recognition and she is blaming the only soul who was only trying to protect her best interest.

Of course his gesture had not been entirely altruistic. There had been a delight as he squeezed the life out of Tom Keen. A satisfaction akin to watching honey be pressed from it's dripping comb. But the sweetness had been short lived. The warmth of Tom's crushed neck was still pulsing in the crook of his arm when Lizzie discovered what he had done. She'd come to find him and the stress of her grief and rage had sent her into premature labor. As she collapsed in his arms, her eyes told him that she knew the fate of her baby, could already feel it slipping out of her and it was far too soon.

"You've taken everything from me," she gasped as he carried her to the car. Even with the pregnancy pounds blossoming on her she was still light as a child in his arms. "Just let us die here," she'd cried, her voice ragged with pain and fury as she struggled in his arms. "There's nothing left! You've taken it all away from me."

He'd taken everything from her.

Her last words to him.

He shakes his head as if to clear it of this memory, comes back to the library, back to Samar.

"I'll be away for some time," he says. "But I'll always be within 12-24 hours away if my presence is needed." He hands her a small card with a name and number scribbled on it. "My associate," he says, "will know how to reach me at all times." Samar takes the card, glances at it and tucks it into her pocket, then returns to her perfectly still pose. Their business is, as yet, unfinished.

He reaches into the pocket of his coat and takes out a cube of polished wood, small enough to fit in his hand. It looks like nothing. It looks like a child's building block, but its surface is shiny and smooth.

"This is it," he says. He extends the block on his palm to Samar. "This is everything."

"Doesn't look like much," she says, taking it and turning it over in her hands. "How does it work?"

"She will be able to figure it out," he says.

"Reddington," Samar begins and he knows exactly what she is going to say next. "She won't take it. I'm afraid she'll accept nothing from you."

"Then don't tell her it is from me," he says. "When the time comes. . ." His voice trails off as Dembe appears around the corner.

"Raymond," he says. "Everything is ready for you."

"Excellent," Red replies. He turns to Samar. "You understand what you are to do?"

"Yes," she says nodding once.

"Thank you, Samar. Your loyalty, discretion, and assistance will not be forgotten."

"You don't need to thank me. We would do anything for her."

"Even still," he says. He takes her hand in both of his, raises it to his lips and kisses it, then squeezes it before returning it to her. Then he turns from her and strides soundlessly away, inhaling the earthy and delicious smell of the books one last time. There is no comfort or joy in this scent today.

4. Nothing

She sits at the meager desk in the motel room, her laptop before her. She's not bothered to put on more than her cami and underpants. The curtains are closed. It is dark. She is alone.

Alone.

Empty.

A sob rises up to gag her, but she chokes it down. She pecks the down arrow through her inbox. There is nothing there of interest. Nothing helpful. Nothing illuminating.

Nothing.

Her wet hair drips down her back in a cool trickle. She runs through the list of things she could do to keep busy. Running. Drinking. Playing solitaire.

She could nip out to the diner on the corner for a sandwich or some coffee, but her appetite is less than robust these days. It seems there is nothing optimal to distract her from the scene that intrudes her thoughts and plays out over and over.

"You killed him," she had stated matter of factly that day when they met in his apartment.

"Yes," he replied with a small nod of his head, equally matter of fact. He slid his hat off his head and into his arm.

"How?" She looked wildly around the room, trying to calculate just what he was telling her.

"I did it to save you," he floundered. She hadn't even stopped to note that Raymond Reddington was practically choking on his words before her, stumbling over them like a fool. He had almost seemed afraid in that moment, she realizes this now. But at the time she was too focused on her questions and the answers she would get.

"No!" She screamed. "I didn't ask you why! I asked you how. How did you kill my fiancée?"

"Lizzie," he began. "That man was not your fiancée. That man was no one to you but an enemy. He was an imposter who meant to do you grave harm."

"He was everything to me! He changed for me. We were going to be a family. He had changed!" She clutched her swollen belly as if to elucidate her point. "You murdered the father of my child! You took away my family! It wasn't enough for you to kill my father? You had to take everything from me?"

Once upon a time he'd revealed to her that he could live with himself and his deeds by saving her life. Could he actually be so deluded as to think he was protecting her here and now?

"Lizzie," he said taking a step towards her. Her shoulders had slumped slightly and she was breathing hard, her hand still on her abdomen as though she was a marathon runner trying to rub off a cramp. He took another step towards her and extended his hand, palm up. He did not dare to touch her. "You have to listen to me. Since you revealed yourself to be Masha Rostova, there is a dark legion of forces attempting to capture you. Tom planned to sell you off to the highest bidder. First chance he got, that's what he was going to do. I wouldn't, I couldn't allow that to happen to you."

She straightened suddenly in a sharp, angry motion. "You lie," she hissed.

"I know this is hard for you to hear. It isn't easy for me to tell you. Please. I'm begging you. You have to believe me. My life without you would be nothing. I would be but a heap of ash blown away on the wind."

"Well, we couldn't have that, could we Reddington? You, poor, narcissistic sociopath! Better you make the man I adore into a heap of ash and cast him into oblivion." She was panting with fury. She barely got the words out.

"Elizabeth," Red said sternly. "You need to relax. This isn't good for the baby."

"Like you care about my baby," she sobbed. "You know what would have been good for my baby? Huh? Having a father would have been good for my baby. Let's stop pretending you have ever had my well being in mind while you have manipulated my life over the past two years. Let's stop pretending your connection to me is anything more than the enormous mind-fuck it is and has always been!"

The cool demeanor with which she had entered the room had melted and she was crying hotly against her fist. She looked up at him to see him standing there with a strange expression on his face, as though

he was wincing in pain. He looked oddly vulnerable and she hated him for it. She remembered the resolve with which she had given him the fulcrum and then turned on her heel. It had been over. Then he was gunned down in the street and there she was with her hand in his chest, trying to stop the blood flow, holding his heart nearly in her hand. How she hated the softening of her own heart in that moment, the desperation she felt that he should not die, not only because he had answers she so desperately needed, but because she cared for him.

Well no longer. She stood there with her hand on her unborn child and she resolved to put an end to this twisted thing. She was going to kill him.

It was as she slipped her hand around to unholster her weapon, she felt the searing pain that sliced through her abdomen. She looked up with a gasp of shock at Reddington, thinking for just a moment that he had beat her to the draw and shot her first. As time slowed, she realized the gushing between her legs. It didn't stop or slow. She doubled over in a pain she'd never known before and saw the puddle of crimson on the floor between her legs.

"No," she whispered. Her head started to numb and swirl.

"Lizzie," he called, but her ears did not want to let his voice in and he sounded very far away. She was about to lose consciousness. She knew this. She was hemorrhaging in a helplessly fast current. He caught her before she hit the floor.

"Let me go you bastard!" She screamed, coming to her senses at his touch. She writhed in his arms, longing for the spot on the floor where she would have landed had he not caught her. "Let me go! You've taken everything from me," she gasped as he carried her to the car. "Just let us die here," she'd cried, her voice ragged with pain and grief as she struggled against him. "There's nothing left! You've taken it all away from me."

She'd lost consciousness before they even got to the car.

She woke many hours later in a hospital room, a stranger's blood swimming in her veins and no baby swimming in her womb.

Alone.

Empty.

The nurses told her she had been delirious. In addition to the blood loss that nearly killed her, she'd had an infection and rampant fever. That was when she had dreamed of Tom meeting her in front of the church on their wedding day. Their wedding that never happened in real life, played out in her fever dream as he led her down the aisle and gave her away to a blonde woman holding a baby on the altar. How she screamed as the woman dragged her away and handed Tom her baby.

For a moment, as she recalled this dream, she half wondered if Reddington had been telling her the truth. He'd sworn never to lie to her. But nothing made sense and her head swam with the sedatives and painkillers they had given her so she couldn't figure it out.

Part of her expected him to come walking into her hospital room with a bunch of flowers, make a few jokes, tell her a story that somehow circled back to the situation they were in. But no. She was done listening to stories at his knee. She would have none of it. He could give her nothing to ease this pain. There was nothing he could say to make her forgive him.

Nothing.

In the end, it had been Samar who came with flowers and a card from the rest of the staff. "We're all so sorry, Liz," she said. Her normally impassive face looked wrought with vicarious trauma.

"Thank you," Liz had said, feeling it was an absurd reply but not knowing what else to say.

"If you need anything, Liz, anything. . . we're all here for you." Samar took Liz's hand in her own and squeezed it. The warmth of her hand made Liz realize how cold her own fingers were.

It was the last human comfort and contact she had experienced.

She slams her laptop shut and walks to the kitchenette of her room. She uncorks a bottle of wine, sloshes some into a plastic cup, and tosses it back. Looking around, she locates her jeans hanging over the back of a chair. She digs her cell phone out of the pocket, contemplates putting the jeans back on but throws them back over the chair. She takes her phone, bottle and cup to the unmade bed and climbs in, pulling the sheet and blanket up over herself.

She thinks of Samar holding her hand and stares at her phone for the better part of an hour, intermittently sipping her wine. Unbidden tears slide down her face in cool trickles.

After she has finished a third glass, she presses on her phone and dials the number for the one person she feels she can trust.

5. Reflection

Dearest Lizzie,

There will be no forgiveness, I know, for the damage you believe I have wrought in your life. There are no words to express how sorry I am for the loss of your baby. It is something that will change you forever, alter the very pattern of who and why you are. I know this to be one of the greatest truths.

Over the past two years, I have watched you garner strength you never knew you had. Sam used to send me letters about all your deeds and misdeeds and he would say in every one how strong-willed you were. You have grown into a woman who is strong not only in will, but in every possible way. I have watched this strength surprise you, time and time again. It will not fail you now. It is infinite, your strength. It is portable inside of you and goes with you to every new, awful, and challenging situation to which you must travel.

When you wake, you will not feel strong. Physically, you will feel weak from the pain and transfusions and medication they have given

you to save your life. This physical discomfort will be but a whisper compared to what you will feel aching in the fibers of your soul.

I write this as you writhe in fevered agony in your hospital bed. Never in my life have I felt more helpless as I have these last hours at your bedside. I've kissed your burning forehead and whispered in your ear that it will be alright. I've told you a hundred times that I love you. Indeed, my dear girl, if love could save, I would have rescued both you and your tiny child. My love would have spared you the pain and loss of this terrible trial through which you must fight.

Though I will not be there when you wake, as I know beyond a doubt you will not have me and will wish me dead, my undying adoration will be always within your reach. It is but a paltry token, I know, in light of recent events.

There is no price that could be awarded to you to assuage this wretched trauma. Before our Jennifer was born, my wife lost a set of twins. They were born too soon and lived for several days before we watched them breathe their final breaths. The sorrow of losing them nearly tore us apart. Neither of us could bear the pain, either separately or together. The only thing that saved our marriage was my departure to sea for close to a year. Were you conscious and speaking to me, I would share with you stories of my time at sea. But those are not to be shared today, if ever.

When I came home, Jennifer was conceived and we were able to begin anew. It was a cruel pleasure, however, as I lost both my wife and my daughter to the life into which I was brutally forced, not too long after our Jenny's eighth birthday. I have been on an odyssey ever since.

When you wake, you will be forever altered. We are so similar, you and I, Lizzie. You will not want to acknowledge or admit this, but it is true. It is one of the many reasons I feel such deep and abiding kinship with you. When you were but a preschooler, I looked in your eyes and knew I'd not only met my match, but the other half of my very soul. It is the only half of me about which I care a whit, and partly why I have survived so craftily low these many years. I realized this selfish urge for self preservation when you came to me in the box and I felt our halves click together as neatly as key and lock. You made me whole and opened a door within me that had been snugly shut for eons and behind which I had hid in darkness. Emerging to bask in the warm glow of you brought to light the very importance of my own survival to keep you safe.

In reflection, I know it also to be true that my physical reemergence in your life was unavoidable. What had been set in motion by Tom and Berlin was mounting to a deadly peak. There have been moments of selfish pleasure I have taken in your company, but my task is and always was to keep you from danger. I beg of you now to understand this fact, even as you curse the day we met.

And so once again, I have carried you out of peril into more peril.

While I am desperately sorry for the loss of your baby, I can not apologize to you for dispatching that louse who called himself Tom. He meant to do you harm, as he had done before. He was not worthy of

your trust or forgiveness. Someday you will understand, even if the day never comes when you can thank me.

I will not rest until I am able to prove this to you beyond the shadow of your doubt. You are possibly the only person in the world for whom I would walk to the ends of earth simply to lie parched and starving at your feet, and rasp pleas for mercy from my dehydrated throat.

I will also never be sorry for carrying you out of the apartment to safety. I could no more have let you bleed to death than harm an innocent lamb.

These two items are perhaps the only limitations in how far I am willing to go for you.

You should know I saw you reach for your gun. I was prepared to die by your hand with your name on my lips, as I was the night you saved me from the auction. Yes, it was your name I uttered, your name that brought me peace and acceptance as Yaabari was about to pull the trigger. There have been many nights I sat alone and dreamed of such a sentence to deliver me from the treachery of my miserable life. As I reflect on all of this, I realize it would be a salvation better than any that I truly deserve to die by your hand with the image of your lovely face imprinted on my brain and your sweet name scenting my dying breath.

But my work was not, and is not yet done, and until it is time for me to take that dying breath, I will toil to secure your safety. It is a vow I solemnly swore decades ago and will honor until death do us part.

You shared with me your fantasy when we were on the run and hiding out in the theater. How clearly I can remember you holding that frothy dress up under your pert, little chin and telling me about the child who would hold hands between you and your beloved. I said it was as it should be, even as it tore my heart in two. You will have this, Lizzie. I have not robbed you of love and a family. I promise, you will have all your dreams come to reality someday, but it was not meant to be with Tom.

And now to the business at hand:

The issue of your safety continues to be one of tantamount priority. There will be instructions and contingencies sent to you. While I will respect your space and keep my distance, I shall not be far and as always, if ever you are in need, I and all of my resources will be at your service.

Although I expect you to accept nothing from me, there will be deeds to some properties sent to you which you can sell for your own profit. There will also be various accounts and other items you may liquidate as needed. When the time comes to run- and the time will come, Lizzie- you must run, hard and fast without looking back. You must remember your strength and push past the pain. You must run and fight.

My time is running short, as you will soon regain consciousness. I will take my leave. I ask nothing of you now but that you hear and consider what I am trying to tell you. Take care of yourself. Be

safe.

You will forever have this old heart on which you cut your teeth.

It is yours, and yours alone,

R.R.

6. Call

"Hello?"

"Hey. It's me."

"Liz? Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine."

Samar knows Liz is most definitely not fine. How could she possibly be fine after what she has been through in the last month? They all knew Tom deserved to die, but it still had been traumatic for Liz. She had loved him blindly and beyond reason. Reddington had had Samar chasing around after Liz and Tom ever since Liz was exonerated and the pair reunited. Samar had been almost afraid when Red expressed the fury of not only his terror for Liz's safety, but his alarming jealousy of the younger man, one afternoon in a secret meeting with her. He had nearly started to lose his grip, so frantic was he to keep Elizabeth safe. He had been so sure of himself, so certain Liz would not only understand, but forgive.

It seems ridiculous for Liz to be telling Samar that she is fine, almost to the point of psychosis.

There is a moment of silence during which Samar considers the package Reddington had given her. She will somehow have to convince Liz to take it and use it, whatever it is, or whatever it contains. Reddington had been secretive about that.

If he had been secretive about the package, he was entirely clear when it came to his directive to Samar. "Keep her safe," he had ordered. "Keep her close and keep her safe."

"When are you coming back to work?" Samar asks. If she only knew how Samar had been stalking her for the past week and a half Liz wouldn't be calling. She would be furious.

"I'm not sure. I hope soon. I'm going out of my skull from boredom. But I went to the shrink again and he has not given me the green light to return. It's frustrating, but. . ." her voice trails off. "Listen, are you busy right now?"

"Busy? Hardly. It's ten o'clock at night. I was going to do some reading and go to bed."

"Oh."

"Did you need something?"

"It's just, well, I haven't been sleeping. And there's really no one

for me to talk to."

"Do you want me to come over?"

"No. No. You should go to bed. I'll be fine."

The plaintive and childlike loneliness in Liz's voice sears through Samar's shell. She's gotten close to Liz these last months. A sad smile tickles the corners of her lips. She twirls a black curl that has fallen from her messy bun, then catches herself. She hasn't done that since she was a child herself. . . since she used to talk in furtive whispers on the phone to Saida.

"Liz. You don't have to be alone. Do you want me to come over?"

"I wouldn't mind."

"I'm on my way."

Samar throws back the covers on her bed, grabs her jeans and pulls on a sweater. Out of habit she reaches for her gun and realizes she has locked it in the safe next to the bed. She opens the safe with her thumbprint, grabs the weapon and tucks it into the waistband of her jeans. She glances momentarily at the nondescript cube Reddington had bestowed upon her.

But it doesn't seem like the right time. Not yet.

7. Response

"Elizabeth Keen," Samar says. "Are you. . . drunk?"

"Who me? No. Well, a little buzzed maybe." Liz has opened the door for Samar in naught but her cami and underpants. She slurs her words ever so slightly. If Samar wasn't such a slave to details, she might not even notice the miniscule shift of balance in Liz's posture. Liz's cheeks are flushed from whatever she's been drinking. She opens the door a bit wider for Samar, "Come on in. Ignore the mess."

Samar walks past Liz into the motel room. Liz has been staying in this pit since she was discharged from the hospital. It serves a dual purpose, or so she thinks. First, she couldn't bear to go back to the apartment where she and Tom had reunited, planned their wedding, and nurtured the dreams of their family, so she is avoiding the memories and pain, or at least she is attempting to.

Second, she is eluding Reddington. She doesn't want him watching her, stalking her, protecting her. So, she is hiding herself away from him, or so she thinks.

"Would you like a glass of wine? Or a plastic cup, really. I haven't bought any stemware yet," Liz mutters as she walks over to the mini fridge.

"Ok," says Samar. "What are we drinking?"

"There is red wine, white wine, and also a case of champagne that was supposed to be for the wedding. I'm consuming it as part of my therapeutic closure." She says the last word- closure- with her

fingers making air quotes, and a bitter face, her lips curled around the cruelty of it.

"Champagne?" Samar says, understanding the terrible irony. Liz was supposed to have so much to celebrate, and yet here she is in this dismal place, all alone. Reddington would throw a fit if he could see this. Samar pictures him throwing Liz over his shoulder and carrying her out of the motel in her underwear, not caring that she is kicking and screaming in protest. She makes a mental note to work on getting Liz out of this room and into a brighter habitat.

"Champagne it is," Liz says cheerily enough and reaches into the fridge for a bottle.

"No, Liz. That's not what I meant. I don't want to drink your champagne. It was just surprising, or strange to imagine you drinking your wedding champagne alone in here."

"Then let's not drink alone," she says. She starts to peel the foil off of the cork. She struggles with the cork for a bit. Samar takes off her coat and looks for a place to put it down. She drapes it next to Liz's jeans on the arm of the crude, wooden chair. Liz grunts and bites her lip.

"Can I help you with that, Keen?"

"Ok. Sure," Liz hands the bottle to Samar, and trips over her own feet as she does so.

"You sure you're not drunk enough already?"

Liz looks up under the dark fringe of her lashes. She smiles and says, "I dunno. Maybe?" Samar smiles back at her as the cork pops. If it all wasn't so desperately sad, it would be adorable and hilarious. She pours frothy bubbles into two plastic cups. Liz takes a big gulp and hiccups. "I did have a few glasses of wine earlier," Liz concedes. "I guess maybe I lost track. I find that's what happens when you drink alone."

"You don't have to be alone," Samar says, her voice even and low. "There are people who care very much about you." Samar considers the safe in her apartment, and the package from Reddington. For as much damage as he has wrought in the past two years, there is nothing he would not do for Elizabeth. "Take care of my Lizzie," she hears Reddington growl, even now.

"Do you want to watch a movie? I think there is a Hitchcock marathon on some channel here," Liz fiddles with the TV remote and accidentally spills some of her champagne. Samar can't help but laugh as Liz helplessly swipes at the drops that have fallen on her cami.

"We can watch TV if you want," Samar says.

"See? Rebecca is on. Have you ever seen it? I love this movie. Joan Fontaine is flawless. I always wanted to be a blonde like her. But then when I was a blonde I found out it really wasn't that much fun."

"I never figured you for a classic movie buff, Keen."

"My adoptive father, Sam, and I used to watch them every weekend. I wouldn't call myself a buff. I'm actually not even sure if I enjoy them all that much, but they bring me a weird comfort. I think maybe it's the familiarity."

"Makes sense," Samar says. She looks around her for some place to sit and ends up sitting down next to Liz on the end of the bed. "How are you? Really?"

"I'm furious. Frustrated. Devastated. Bored out of my mind. A little bit of everything really," she looks down and suddenly seems to notice she's sitting there in only her underwear. She grabs a pair of pajama pants from their crumpled nest on the floor and pulls them over her lean legs. Samar notices how thin and pale Liz looks. She's lost the pregnancy weight that had made her look so soft and given her a glow, and now looks almost translucent and angular, though no less beautiful. "I'm dying to go back to work," Liz continues. "I need something to do."

"And you will come back. When you are ready," Samar says. Liz rolls her eyes. "You've been through a lot. We wouldn't want you to come back before you're ready."

"Yeah," she snaps. "I get it." She tosses back the rest of the champagne in her cup. She hops up from the bed and shuffles over to grab the bottle of champagne. She refills both their cups and sits back down on the bed next to Samar. "Anyway, I'm sick of talking about it. I'm sick of people not knowing how to talk to me about it. That's one of the worst parts, you know, how people have completely lost their ability to talk with me in a normal way. I feel like a circus freak or some other oddity in a dark tent in the back of a carnival that people come by to gawk at. So my weird and obsessive benefactor murdered my ex-husband-fiancee? So I gave birth to a baby at 19 weeks who died after only a couple breaths in my arms? So what? Get over it and stop staring."

"You are not a circus freak," Samar sighs. She places a hand on Liz's arm that is meant to be reassuring, but when Liz turns to look back at her, Samar notices her hands tremble on Liz's soft skin.

"Thank you, Samar." Liz exhales gratefully. She takes Samar's hand in her own and squeezes it, bringing it up over her heart and pressing it to her. "You have no clue how much that means to me. It's like you're the only person I can really talk to."

Samar clears her throat and takes an indulgent sip of her champagne. "Anytime. Really."

"Well, enough about me," Liz says and releases Samar's hand. She scampers back on the bed so she is lying propped up by pillows. She pats the space next to her, and Samar toes off her shoes before climbing up to the head of the bed. "How are things with you? How are things with Ressler?"

"Ugh," groans Samar, rolling her eyes and head back. "There is nothing going on with Ressler. That was a one-time mistake, not to be repeated."

"I'm sorry," Liz offers.

"Oh don't be. We got caught up in a moment and it happened, but it really shouldn't have."

"I feel like it is partially, or entirely, my fault. If I hadn't called and asked you to help me that morning. . . "

"Not at all. Having you call me that morning was one of the best things that happened for me. I was happy to help you. It meant a lot, you know, that you called me. That you trusted me."

"I did," Liz says quietly. "And I do." For a while they do not talk as they watch Laurence Olivier drive Joan Fontaine down the coast of Monte Carlo. "I'm afraid you broke poor Aram's heart, though," Liz says finally.

"Yes. I do feel sorry about Aram being hurt. But truth be told, neither Aram nor Ressler are my type."

"Oh yeah?" Liz yawns. Her eyes are half closed and her lashes cast a shadow under her eyes, making the purple shadows even deeper. She looks like she is about to pass out. It wouldn't be the worst thing for her, Samar thinks. She needs sleep. Samar watches as her breath slows and deepens, but then Liz has a reflexive jerk and she is wide awake again.

"Liz, you should get some sleep." Samar takes both of their cups and places them on the night stand. "I can get out of your way."

"Please don't leave yet, Samar. Just a little longer?"

"Of course. But you need your rest to gather your strength. Look at you. You're frail as a doll."

Liz laughs sleepily at this. "Yes. I'm a doll. Or a puppet more like. At least that's what Reddington thought I was."

"Have you heard from him?"

"Reddington? God no." In her current state of mild inebriation, Liz does not think to ask Samar why she would ask her about Red. Samar bites her lip, wondering if she should tell Liz about the meeting and the package. But then Liz's hand is reaching out for Samar's, and it is a welcome distraction from thoughts of Reddington. Anyway, Liz is drunk and it is not the time. Not yet. Samar clutches Liz's hand, and feels a swelling of emotions in her chest that she has not felt in well over a decade.

"I'll stay as long as you like," Samar sighs.

"Mmmm, thanks," Liz says. "So, if Aram and Ressler aren't your type, who is?"

Samar feels her breath catch in her throat and she turns to answer Liz, but finds she has drifted off to sleep. Samar reaches up with the unheld hand and brushes the hair off of Liz's forehead. And almost without even realizing she is doing it, she brings Liz's fingers to her lips and kisses them before she takes her leave of the tiny motel room.

8. Prayer

Dearest Elizabeth,

I write to you from a pew in the Duomo di Milano. I can tell you this because I won't be here for much longer. My feet have barely walked the streets of one city for longer than 36 hours since I left you. I suppose I should be exhausted, and maybe I am, but there is too much to be done.

And so I roam the earth, toiling, dragging a heaviness with me like Jacob Marley and his miles of chain. They are chains of my own creation, forged from decades of misdeeds. In helping you, or in doing what I imagined was protecting you, I thought perhaps the leaden links would begin to disappear. Indeed, looking in your eyes I felt a lightness I hadn't known in nearly 30 years. I felt it the very first time you came to me in the box. There I was pinned down in actual chains, and I felt freer than I'd ever been. I felt it again sitting across from you in the restaurant in Vancouver, and again when I allowed my hand to stroke your hair when I found you in the Stewmaker's cabin. Lizzie, saving your life is the only thing that has allowed me to live mine.

There are so many things I want to tell you, to share with you. So, I have been writing these letters. Some I send to your PO box and others I tear and cast into the fire. Others still, I have watched flutter on the wind like gulls above the sea, until they touch down in the waves and I know the ink has been smeared into the ancient salts and carried away with the currents.

In these missives, I have told you everything- who you are and what you are to me, what you have become to me. I have told you about your mother. I have told you about the things I want to do and experience with you, and the things I want to do to you. . .

It is not fair to burden you with any of my fantasy right now, as you are grieving and angry. Know only that I adore and miss you with each unworthy fiber of my being. Every breath I take now is merely a means to the end of saving and seeing your lovely face again.

I'm afraid that Milan is not much of a city compared to the rest of Italy, but if you were here with me it would be lovelier than any other. I've taken to coming into churches, in whatever city I find myself, so I can bow my head and whisper your name as though in prayer. Indeed, it is the only prayer I pray. It is a prayer suited for such a cathedral, which took nearly six centuries to finish and is one of the largest in the world. Milan might be the armpit of Italy, but this church is a palace, a place of heaven on earth. And though there is nowhere on the planet where I can find succor, seek though I may, the language of your name in my mouth brings me an odd sensation of calm, if only for a moment.

Were you here with me, we would wander la Galleria, arm in arm with a bottle of champagne between us. We would meander its stalls of jewelry and bread and scarves taking long pulls of champagne. We could walk the streets of boutiques and I would buy you anything you wanted. The people here are friendly, warm, hospitable. And though they are quite religious, they are also very romantic. They would not bat an eye or mind a bit as I would push you up against a building

down some cobblestone alley and kiss you, long and deep and unabashed, the way we were meant to kiss.

I wish you were here with me. I wish I had more of you than simply your name whispered in solemn and desperate prayer, and yet I know even that is far more than I deserve. I am wretched with my longing for you. Sleep eludes me, which is perhaps cruelest of all because I lose the chance of seeing you in the cinema of my brain's dreams.

My mind continues to roll over the words of Beethoven to his Immortal Beloved, as I write to you on this dingy page. He said, "Oh continue to love me, never misjudge the most faithful heart of your beloved." Indeed, Lizzie, you have misjudged me. I know I have hurt you, although it was the last intention I ever had. If only I could kneel before you, beg you to reconsider and overrule the judgement you have cast upon me, for I never meant to do you harm. I will slave until the end of time for just that opportunity. Indeed, my heart is faithful and has never diverted from its steadfast path towards you, the only home I have ever known.

Hopefully these letters are finding you well. The time is coming, Elizabeth. I trust Samar has given you the item with which I entrusted her. Instructions will come in due time. Should you need anything, she knows how to reach me, and I will be at your elbow in but an instant. We will fight and then we will know peace. After that, you can decide what you want, and you can do with me as you will.

Until then, my love, I will see you in the stars and touch your name on my lips as prayer, as lullaby, as my only vow.

"Ever thine. Ever mine. Ever ours."

-R.R.

9. Roaming

Samar can't remember the last time she spent an entire day roaming a museum, let alone having cool, white wine and hunks of cheese and bread for lunch next to an indoor waterfall, across from a beautiful woman.

She was surprised when Liz called and asked her to spend Saturday at the National Gallery. She continues to be surprised throughout the day that she is out and about with her. Truth be told, she's not necessarily an art fanatic. She tells Liz as much as they stand before an exhibit of an entire shark suspended in a tank of formaldehyde.

"How exactly is this 'art,'" she asks.

Liz stifles a laugh which echoes anyway in the vaulted gallery. "To tell you the truth, I have no idea. I don't actually know that much about art."

"Really?" Samar asks, looking incredulously at Liz. "Then why did we come here?"

"Well," Liz begins with upturned eyebrows and a small smile. "I do

like it here. I love the feeling of being lost in the galleries. I've been coming here alone a lot since I lost the baby," she swallows hard, and her smile fades.

Over the past few days, Samar has noticed how quickly moods pass across Liz's face, much like clouds across a sky as they cover the sun and signal a storm. Liz continues, putting an almost artificial brightness into her tone, "I decided I would try coming with some company and see if I liked it as much."

"And?"

"And I am very much enjoying your company." Liz puts a hand on Samar's shoulder for a moment. They walk away from the shark. They start down a hallway lined with marble statues that look cool and satiny. "Besides, you seemed like the type who would like art."

"I have to confess, I know very little about art," Samar laughs. She wonders if the last time she was actually in a gallery was on the school trip to the Iranian Art Museum nearly two decades ago. She remembers it was the first time she and Saida held hands as they toured the gallery of black and white, ink prints, giggling at how they looked like mere scribbles to the teenage eye. Shaking this memory off, she adds, "But if you need to know anything about Israeli counter-terrorism, I'm your girl."

Samar does not care to add that she already knows Liz has been coming to the National Gallery for weeks, and that she has never really been alone as she has cruised the exhibits and taken her lunch by the underground waterfall. She does not tell Liz that she has seen her dabbing at tears as she stands before Degas' Little Dancer. She does not mention that she already knows Liz is drawn to the painting of The White Girl by Whistler, or that Liz has spent much time sitting in front of the nautical paintings. She allows herself to experience it all as though for the first time, and in a way it is the first time.

After their lunch, and before meandering the sculpture gallery, they use the Ladies Room. Samar is washing her hands when she sees Liz adjusting her shirt and sees the weapon tucked into the back of her pants.

"Keen!" Samar hisses, grabbing aggressively for a paper towel.

"What?"

Samar pointedly looks at the spot where Liz is concealing her gun. "Where did you get that? You are not supposed to carry."

Liz steps a bit closer to Samar and lowers her voice, just in case. "I got it at a pawn shop a few weeks ago. It helps me feel safe. Why are you so surprised?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because you are packing an illegal firearm in a museum?"

"I also have a knife strapped to my boot under my right pant leg, if you really must know. Come on. Like you aren't armed right here and now?" They speak in whispers and have come very close to one another.

Samar puts both of her hands squarely on Liz's shoulders.

"Elizabeth, you are safe with me. Do you understand that?" Her voice is low, almost sultry, aiming at sounding comforting, but her face is stone serious. Liz brings her hands up to Samar's elbows.

"Thank you. I appreciate it. Really. But I also need to protect myself." They consider one another, then Liz turns to fiddle with her hair in the mirror. "I do feel safe with you, Samar," she says gazing at her through the reflection. "I do."

"Good. I hope so." Samar stands there feeling both frustrated and helpless. What had started as a lovely day has suddenly turned dark and stormy. As they meander the sculpture garden, she decides she has to tell Liz.

"Keen, there is something I need you to know."

"Oh yeah? What is it?" Liz looks up into Samar's face, squinting a little in the sun. She looks calm, more peaceful than she has looked in weeks. She's still not sleeping, and she's still drinking too much, and she's still staying in that god awful motel room, but right at this moment she looks relaxed and confident, almost like her old self.

Samar finds herself choking on the words she was going to say, incapable of puncturing this moment of serenity for either of them.

She'll bring her the package tonight. It has to happen. Liz trusts her. If she allows things to go much further, it is going to devastate Liz when she discovers for whom Samar is working, and why. If she allows things to go much further, they are both going to wind up hurt, because Samar knows Liz will never forgive her.

"I just wanted you to know how nice this is. I know it's happened in kind of unorthodox circumstances, but it's been wonderful hanging out with you, Liz."

"You've been such a good friend to me, Samar. Honestly I don't know what I would have done these last couple weeks without you." Liz puts her arm under Samar's and they walk a few paces together like that, their shoulders brushing against one another in the sun.

a**_/n: thanks so much for reading this. and thank you for your generous comments. i love comments so please feel free to let me know what you are thinking of this story... if you had thought this was going to be fluffy, i apologize for the darkness that is about to come, but the name of the story is Hopeless. xoxo... _**

10. Burning

He's not a man who cries.

He's not a man prone to outbursts of foolish sentimentality. He is not impetuous or impulsive. He's not a man who sits in the dark, alone, and drops his face into the cradle of his hands. No.

Even in rage, he is precise, deliberate, intentional. He is a man who walks slowly, still dressed in the most expensive tuxedo pants, shirt and vest, blood spattered though they may be, and squeezes off rounds from a shotgun as the world crumbles into madness around him. He is a man whose pulse does not quicken as he strides across a prison yard in the world's blackest black site and drives demons back to hell so that he might retrieve love and light from its fiery depths.

He is a man who can wait without breaking a sweat. He is a man who can sit and hold steady for hours on end, days if necessary, like a hunter in the brush.

He is not a man who burns wildly out of control. He is a man who smolders.

He is not a man who quakes in the stillness, whose hands shake and squeeze open and shut around the air. He is not a man who paces off the hours of night with trembling in his gut. No. He is not this man.

Or so he tries to tell himself.

He urges himself to pull it together even as he covers his mouth with his palm and whispers her name, the four syllables creating little puffs of air in his hand. He bites the pad of flesh at the base of his index finger. His shoulders rise and fall. He feels the maddening tickle of a tear making it out of the corner of his eye. He bites himself harder and longs to punch something.

How had he lived apart from her all those years? How had he managed to compel his heart to beat, his lungs to breathe without the sensation of her heat next to him? How he not languished in painful pining every second of his life while she was not by his side?

He tries to remember what life was like, before that day he kneeled in supplication at her feet. The FBI thought they had captured him, thought he was submitting to their wily authority. Little did they know he bowed down only for one soul, which they delivered to him in a golden goblet as he sat there in chains.

He tries to remember the women and the wine. The intrigue and travel. Even as he sits alone he could have anything he wanted. He could have beautiful women brought to him with a snap of his fingers, as many as he wanted, all at once even. He could have the most expensive bottle of scotch to sip languidly as an entire harem stroked his every whim upon silk sheets. They would be willing and voluptuous. They would live to please him. They would not be bitter and skeptical. They would not reject or misjudge him.

He shakes the idea away. He'll have none of it. None of it could ease the pain of losing her, of knowing she too suffers alone.

How many times a day does he calm himself by whispering her name. How many times does he allow his tongue to stroke the syllables of her because it is all he has left?

He reaches for a piece of paper and a pen. He is not a man who writes a woman's name over and over on a piece of paper and then tears it up and casts it like a hundred wishes into the breeze. He is not this man.

Except he is.

11. Once

"He kissed me once. Did you know that?" Liz asks over the rim of her coffee cup.

"Who?"

"Reddington."

"Really? No. I didn't know that," Samar returns. She is genuinely surprised, not only by Liz's revelation, but also by the acute knife of jealousy that stabs her suddenly. "When?" She asks the question with the neutral tone she has carefully perfected over the years.

"It was a while back, when we were on the run." Liz sighs and sits back in her seat. Samar had left the Post Office for lunch with Liz. They were sitting in a window of a cafe, munching salads. Samar had not made much headway getting Liz out of that dreadful motel, but she was working on her nutrition. Every bite of the salad with grilled chicken that Liz takes feels like a minor victory to Samar, who tucks her legs under her chair as she listens to Liz confide in her. "We had gotten very close. I mean, we'd been close is a really weird, fucked up way prior to that, but something shifted between us when we were on the run. I guess I knew I'd always been his world, but then all of a sudden, he was mine. He was the only person I had to talk to, the only person I could trust. And the funniest part was, I didn't really mind it."

"Makes sense," Samar says. Part of her hopes this is where the story ends. Part of her hopes for more details. She'd always known about Reddington's obsession and infatuation with Keen, but she never knew it had been anything made flesh. Nor had she known Liz had returned the sentiment.

"So, do you remember when we were holed up in that diner? With all the hostages?"

"Of course."

"Yeah, so after that, we ended up in this shipping container that he'd had all tricked out like the compartment of a luxury liner." In spite of herself, Liz's face spontaneously relaxes into a smile. "I had lost it and beaten the crap out of a guy in the diner who was threatening his girlfriend. I almost killed him. I probably would have killed him if Red hadn't stopped me. It was horrible. Everyone was looking at me like they were terrified. So, at the end of the day, we ended up out in the middle of the ocean and there I was, realizing that I was basically the same as him. A violent fugitive. I was asking him how he could live with people always looking at him like they looked at me in that diner, like I was a monster, or something evil. We were drinking some kind of brandy or port out of these snifters and suddenly he opened the door of the container with this secret code, like he was James Bond or something. We walked out onto the deck and the sky was just on fire with stars. I'd never seen anything like it. He took my hand and told me about how the brightest

star always led the sailors home. Then he told me I was his home. And. . . " She throws up a hand, which falls back into her lap, slapping her thigh as it comes to rest.

"And?"

"And he kissed me." She shrugs and takes a sip of her coffee.

"That sounds very romantic," Samar concedes with a raised eyebrow.

"I suppose in some ways, it might have been. At the time I thought I was still in love Tom."

"Thought?"

"I mean, I was still in love with Tom. I don't know. I'd seen him right before I shot the Attorney General. And we had, you know. . . gotten intimate again. It was confusing. Then of course I found out I was pregnant, and talked myself into giving it another go with him after my exoneration."

"It seemed like you did more than talk yourself into it."

"Yes. Well, I did love him. I did. And he was the father of my child."

"So, it was Tom's baby," Samar bites her lip and regrets the question the moment it comes out of her mouth. "Liz, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. . ."

"No," Liz says, waving hand dismissively between them. "It's understandable. I know when Red and I came back and when it became known I was pregnant there was chatter. People thought I didn't know they were talking about it, wondering. But yeah, it was definitely Tom's baby. He was the only one I'd been with."

"So, you and Reddington, you never?"

"No. Reddington and I never did," she sighs and Samar can't quite tell if it is because they have been talking about Tom and the baby so openly, or because they have been discussing Reddington. Liz looks down into her cup of coffee and seems to get lost in it. "You know, he said Tom was going to sell me to the highest bidder?"

"What?"

"Reddington. He said Tom hadn't really changed, that he was conning me again because there was this enormous price on my head and he was going to auction me off to whomever paid him the most for me."

"Wait. Have you heard from him? From Reddington?"

"God, no. He told me this right before," she pauses and takes a breath. "Right before I lost the baby." She exhales. The words clearly still tax her.

Samar looks at her own hands, "Do you believe it?" She asks the

question in the most level voice she can manage.

"I didn't. I was so angry at him. For manipulating me and murdering Tom. But now, I don't know," she hunches closer to Samar and lowers her voice. "For the past week or so, it feels like someone might be following me, like maybe I'm not entirely safe." She sits back up and rolls her eyes, exhales a hearty breath and says, "Maybe I'm just losing my mind."

Samar reaches across the table and takes Liz's hands in her own. "You are not going crazy. You've been through a terrible ordeal. You're probably the only person I know who could go through what you did and come out of it stronger and more grounded. I admire that about you, Liz."

"And you have been so good to me, Samar. I don't know what I would have done, how I would have managed these last weeks without you. Losing Tom was bad, but I could have born it. The baby, though. Losing her is unbearable. I don't think I'll ever get over it."

"Her?"

"Yes," Liz says as the tears start to slide down her cheeks. "She was a little girl."

"Did you name her?"

"Yeah. I called her Agnes, after Sam's mother." Liz swipes at the tears and seeing her in this pain makes Samar's eyes prickle. It's been a long time since she has cried, and she swallows the lump forming in her throat so she can stay strong for Liz.

"It's a beautiful name," Samar says.

"Thanks," Liz breathes. "I thought so too."

"It's okay to talk about it, to talk about her. If you need to talk about it, that is. Sometimes talking can help. I'm here for you, Liz."

Their hands are still clasped across the table. Liz returns the squeeze Samar gives her. Samar looks at her watch. "I have to be getting back," she says.

"Are you guys busy? What are you working on?"

"You know I can't tell you about that," Samar laughs.

"Oh, come on Samar! Give me just a little taste! I need to at least hear about work, if I can't actually be at work," Liz says, but she is laughing good naturedly.

"Well, keep working on eating and sleeping and getting back in shape and you will be back in no time," Samar says. "Anyway, what does the rest of the day hold for you?"

"Uhh, I don't know. I might go to the bookstore. I also have to get my mail from the post office box, but I don't know if I am ready to deal with that. So, I think I'll take a walk in the park and maybe

grab a book. Simple escapes, right?"

"That actually sounds very nice. But I don't like it that you feel like you are being followed," Samar says. "I'd like to talk to Cooper about giving you a protective detail for a while."

"No. Samar, I don't want that."

"But, Liz," Samar begins.

"No. Please. I appreciate your concern. Really. I do. But I want to feel normal again. I need to feel normal again. I don't want people following me around like I'm some sort of fragile child. I can take care of myself." Liz raises her eyebrows and smiles. "Warrior gene, remember?"

"Alright." Samar says, but as they get up and walk out of the cafe, she knows she is going to have to report this to Reddington. She's been hesitant to contact him at all, mostly out of loyalty to Liz. But this is an exception. This is about safety. She will have to let him know that the protection around Liz will have to be stepped up through unofficial channels, and hopefully, Liz will stay safe and be none the wiser.

12. Drowning

Lizzie,

I write to you from my bed this morning. The windows are open and the wind off the ocean is blowing the curtains into the room in which I stay. It is beautiful. The breeze brushes my skin as I lie here, and my thoughts turn to you.

How I wish you were here, lying in my arms, your head nestled into my chest, listening to this heart that beats only for you, my only love, my sweet Elizabeth. . . my thoughts of you are both torture and the only salve I know.

I yearn for simple things- to pop a grape into your mouth, or to pour cool wine for you into a glass beaded with the sweat of condensation from the hot weather. Would that I could lift your dark tresses off of your neck and kiss the flesh beneath, or bring you a book to read as you lounge in the sand. Even the most pedestrian of gestures would fill my life with grace.

I've taken a liberty, about which I hope one day you will be glad, or at least not upset with me. Enclosed you will find a necklace. I know you had your baby cremated, but that you were unable or unwilling to collect her ashes. When I was in Italy, I had a jeweler friend of mine craft this necklace for you, and inside are some of your daughter's remains. If I've measured correctly, the pendant should sit just above your heart, and you can keep her there with you always.

Tiny Agnes will always be a part of you, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Scientists have found that cells of the babies women carry remain within them for decades after the pregnancy is over. Perhaps it will bring you some comfort to you to know this, and to have a tangible part of her upon your chest.

The gold of it is melted from some 24 karat bangles I bought for you a while back in India. I was going to give them to you as a gift for something or another, but I never got the chance. I've carried them around with me, most of the time keeping them in the breast pocket of my coat. I decided they would be put to better use to adorning your neck in this way.

The loves that stain us are always accidental, unintentional, and irrevocable, like a glass of red wine spilled upon a white shirt which can never again be bleached completely clean. If there is one truth I know, it is this.

I did not intend to adore you with such thorough compulsion. And yet I find myself nearly lost without you. I am forever changed.

I've floundered down the stretch of beach and tossed my body into the sea, part of me hoping I would be carried off on the currents forevermore. But our work is not done.

I will save you. I will prove to you that my affections are honest and pure. I will whisper every secret and every answer into the darling, chambered nautilus of your ear, and only then can you be the judge and jury. You can decide for yourself if you want to pull this drowning man from the water, or leave him to sink and become one with the flotsam and jetsam of memory. I will be at peace with the verdict you reach, with either your condemnation or pardon, so long as you know and believe the whole truth.

There was a time I thought I would be able to rest and breathe again if only I could taste your lips. For over a year, I labored under the delusion that if I could feel your skin beneath my own mouth, I would be sated and free of my wretched yearning. After I did kiss you, however, I knew I would spend the rest of my days in agony, frantically sick with longing for more and more like a pathetic addict.

For a short time, I was able to find peace in my proximity to you. I allowed myself to be placated with the luminous visage of your face, even when it was angry and frustrated with me. But like the addict, my tolerance grew and I needed more and more to satisfy my cravings. There was one night I stayed for hours in my car outside of your apartment. Dembe begged me to either go up and talk to you, or to turn around and go home.

But that's the rub.

I am homeless without you.

I am but a wandering soul, forced to seek sandy shores that can only offer momentary safety and never any solace.

Do you remember when we worked on catching Frederick Barnes? I tried to tell you that I understood why a man would be willing to burn the world down to save the one person who meant anything to him. You were puzzled and furious with me. You didn't understand how similar we were, or maybe you did and you didn't want to see it. Either way, I asked you then and there, outside of his house, to tell me to go. I told you I would disappear. And you said nothing.

That was the moment, Lizzie. That was the point of no return. I'd

already known I was in way too deep, but at that point, I might have been able to walk away, return to my old ways of wandering, women, and wine. But you said nothing. In one brief and simple exchange you'd drawn the line in the sand and then blown it away, erasing forever any chance that our souls could be anything other than intertwined.

Of course you knew nothing of this. You probably still deny it.

I've been travelling, collecting the things that will be necessary for bringing you to safety. It keeps me busy, but does nothing to still the relentless tide of thoughts and dreams of you. Even if I can never kiss your lips again, my love, I will set your life back on its axis. Please let Samar know if you change your mind and need anything from me, and I will be there.

You are my heart and as such, my life.

-R.R.

13. Broken

She's never been much of a sleeper, but lying alone in bed, Samar realizes it has been over a week since she has slept more than three consecutive hours.

It's doing things to her.

Spending all this time with Liz.

It's bringing up stuff she's not felt in ages. Stuff she's not entirely comfortable feeling. Stuff she would rather hide in the back of her mind so she can work and focus.

It's hard to focus on the task at hand when all she can think about are the little tulip petals of lipstick Liz leaves on her coffee mug. It's hard to concentrate on work when she realizes Liz is wearing lipstick again after weeks of barely washing her hair or putting on pants. And it is almost agonizing when Samar finds herself wondering if it could be possible in any way that Liz put lipstick on for her.

It's hard to focus on extracting political secrets from a covert drug ring as she chides herself for wondering about this, and as she realizes there is no way on this planet that Liz could harbor any other feelings for her besides friendship.

But Liz has changed these past couple weeks. She is smiling more. The color has come back into her cheeks and eclipsed the hardness that grief and anger had cast upon her face. Her lovely face. It is a relief to see her relaxing a bit.

The other night they had met up with the guys from work, and it was fun to see the old Liz reemerge as she teased Aram and Cooper for details of the case they were working and laughed when they would give her nothing. Samar couldn't help her own laughter at Liz's antics, and thrilled to feel their thighs pressed close together under the table.

She tried to leave it there. To allow it to be enough.

There is no denying she and Liz have gotten close. There had been a bond between them since they were trapped together in the airport, both of them infected and petrified of their own impending death. That hadn't been the first time she'd seen Liz behave with unselfish bravery that bordered on foolishness, but it left quite the impression on Samar.

_Lipstick petals on a glass. _

The bond deepened when Liz called Samar when she was on the run to help her find Red when he'd been kidnapped by the Kings of the Highway, and then again when she had stepped up to plan Liz's baby shower.

But this new closeness. . . it has a different flavor. Or maybe it is just Samar sensing the difference.

Samar counts the years since Saida, as she lies there in her bed. Five. Ten. Twelve. Fourteen. _Is it even possible, _ she wonders.

Just as Samar was finally starting to get on with her life after Saida, along came Claudia. She'd called her Cloud. She'd thought maybe she could love her, or at least live with her, but then she was moved to the task force. Cloud could not deal with all the time Samar spent working and freaked out when Samar was missing and then nearly killed at the hands of Luther Braxton. Of course Samar couldn't tell her any of what happened, and Cloud packed her things in an angry panic, as Samar limped around the apartment. What had she expected anyway? It wasn't like Samar could quit her job. But poor Cloud. She couldn't bear all of the secrets that Samar was forced to keep.

In the end, it was worse for Cloud than for Samar.

In the end, it was almost a relief for Samar to have her gone.

For a moment when Shur resurfaced in her life, there had been a glimmer of hope and interest. He'd been there in between Saida and Cloud. He'd known about Saida and didn't care one bit, which was quite unusual for a man in their culture. He also didn't seem to care that Samar was still very much in love with Saida, and this created a safety for Samar that ended up drawing them very close. But in the end, it fell apart.

As it always did.

Samar rolls over in her bed, onto her back. She takes a deep breath and places her hands on her abdomen, trying to breathe deep and slow.

She thinks of Liz answering the door of that awful motel room in her panties that night.

She remembers holding Saida in bed on their last night together.

_You could come with me, _Samar had said. _I love you. I'll care for you._

_Sammi, you know I could never leave. I could never leave my family. It would break them. _

She had kissed the burnt honey of Saida's skin until the sun rose, and they parted.

It had broken a part of her, walking away from Saida, like a sledgehammer lowered squarely onto a pocket watch. Part of her wants to confide in Liz about this slice of her history, to let her know she understands what it is to be broken too.

Sleep evades her.

She rolls from back to side and kicks at the covers. She grabs a pillow and wedges it between her legs. She squeezes. She writhes. Moments pass. Her hips undulate against the cushion.

It's not enough.

She tries to think of Saida, of Shur. She finds her brain flashing on Raymond fucking Reddington, and she exhales angrily as she tries to force him out of her mind. It doesn't help.

It's not enough.

She shoves a hand up her nightshirt and pinches at her nipple. She pinches hard enough to elicit a small cry from her own lips. She grinds her face into the pillow at her head and bites down on it. Her hands clench and unclench as she imagines the dove white of Liz's legs. What she would give to wrap herself around them and. . .

It is still not enough.

She brings the fingers of her other hand to her lips and licks the index and middle until they are wet, then she slides them between her legs. She sucks her lower lip as she spins herself against fingers and pillow. She wants it fast. She wants it to be over so she can relax and sleep. Her fingers slip in and out of her as her breath catches and releases and quickens. She thrusts into her fingers and her palm rubs against her mound. She increases the pressure on herself until she feels everything mounting, and then she gasps as she releases against her fingers and her palm and the pillow.

She rolls onto her back again. She closes her eyes as her breath slows and she tries to find sleep.

But it's not enough.

14. Surfacing

Liz has never been a strong swimmer. She can swim, but she lacks any technique or endurance.

This is what she thinks as icy water fills her lungs.

She tries to swallow or expel it from her chest, but it is crushing her, squeezing her from the inside out. Her hands paddle madly to bring her back to the surface, but all her limbs are captured in the

current and can do naught but quiver, helpless and uncooperative.

She throws her head back to look up to the surface, and everything outside of the water is blurry, but terribly bright. It blinds her. She's squinting her eyes against the painfully bright light, but then a dark column passes in front of it, splitting it and softening the glare for her.

She closes her eyes thinking she may as well accept her fate gracefully.

But her eyes snap open like she is a doll who has been sat upright.

This is not her fate.

It was her mother who drowned, or so she was led to believe. It was her mother who walked into the sea and was never seen again, or so Liz was told.

Maybe her mother didn't have this gene, this Warrior Gene.

But she does. Elizabeth Keen does.

It can only mean one thing.

She shakes her head against her pillow until she wakes. She gasps to fill her lungs, as though she has truly been trapped beneath the water. She tries to breathe and can barely get enough oxygen. Her head spins. She tries to tell herself it was a dream, but a flood of adrenaline has already been triggered and courses through her blood, accelerating everything.

She does not feel like a warrior. She is sobbing and alone in her bed in the shitty motel she is staying at as her penance. She sits up, choking on her tears as she choked on those icy dream waters moments ago. She pulls her knees to her chest and hugs them, rocks herself, and tries to calm.

_Penance for what? _ She asks herself angrily. She didn't do anything. She didn't murder Tom and create the sickening death of her unborn baby. _So why the fuck am I punishing myself? _

She flicks on the light on the night stand and reaches for her phone. Her heart races. She clasps her phone to her chest, pressing to try to slow the rate of her heart. Is she dying?

There is no one she can call at this hour. At one time, it would have been completely plausible to pull on a pair of jeans and show up on Red's doorstep, or to call and have Dembe drive him on over to her, but that seems like ages ago, and perhaps it was.

Now there is not a soul who she could wake to help calm her, to kiss her forehead and whisper, "It's going to be alright. . . There's nothing wrong with you. . . There's nothing wrong." How is it even possible she believed those words, let alone that she would ever again want to hear them murmured smokily upon her brow?

She is certain her heart is going to explode. She knows this is how

it feels to drown because this is exactly how it felt when Braxton's men covered her head with a soaking hood and poured water on her, over and over again, trying to break her.

She's never had a panic attack before. Warriors do not panic. She did not panic when Braxton water boarded her. Warriors walk about the world with smoldering power and confidence until they need to spring into action. _This can't be happening, _she says. Sweat beads on her forehead, and she can feel it trickle down into the small of her back. Cold, dripping sweat.

This isn't happening, she chants. She thinks she can force herself to believe it. Force herself to calm. But the more she says it, _This isn't happening, _ the more it happens and happens.

Warriors do not have panic attacks, but women who lose things do. Women who lose their husbands and babies and careers and their. .

.

. . . what the fuck was Reddington anyway? Her protector? Her dementor? She remembers being trapped in that airport hangar, spinning around and looking for a loophole as Solomon crooned, "What is it between you two anyway? Some say it's a May/December thing. Others say it's a Daddy/Daughter thing. I like to think it's a little of both."

He'd never told her. He'd told her bits and pieces, but never the whole thing.

She will get it. She'll extract the truth from him, word by word until she knows it all. He will tell her. He will fucking give it all up to her because she is a warrior. She tortured Tom, in the hull of that ship. She'd denied him food and warmth. She'd made him sleep in his own filth.

It's not something of which she is proud. But she did it to Tom so she can do what she needs to do to Reddington too. When the time comes.

The thoughts swirl and flicker in her brain like a school of fish, swimming fast and in unison and she can't follow just one.

It is dizzying.

She gulps for air, pounds her fists down against the bed, furious and frightened.

_This is it, _ she thinks. She waits for death to take her, for it to constrict around her heart in one last pulse of terror and sorrow.

The moment passes, and then another. She is still there, although everything continues to move impossibly fast. Her heart pounds in her head. It's gotten so loud.

She hears her name being called somewhere within the rhythm of the pounding. "Liz! Are you in there? Keen! Answer me!"

She puts her head against her knees and whispers, "I'm coming, Agnes. Mommy is coming."

But the pounding has stopped, and when she looks up, Samar is standing there in front of her bed, her dark curls wild around her head. Liz thinks maybe she saw a portrait of this angel when she was in the gallery. She shakes her head a bit to focus her eyes.

It is Samar. The real, living Samar.

Liz is not dead, she is simply huddled in her bed, shivering as the flood of adrenaline slows.

"My god, Liz," Samar says and rushes to sit next to her on the bed. Liz leans into her and weeps. Samar's arms come around her and she rocks her slowly as Liz cries and cries. "I've got you," she says. "Liz, just breathe. You're going to be alright." She sweeps the hair away from Liz's face that is plastered there with sweat and tears. She presses her lips to her forehead and keeps whispering things as Liz's breath and tears slow.

Samar gradually lies Liz back against her pillows, but does not let go and lies there with her. Eventually, they both fall asleep.

15. Awake

*A/N: Thanks to everyone who is taking the time to read this and leave me such thoughtful and motivating comments. You all make my day! xoxoxo. . . *

Before she even opens her eyes, Liz smells incense. It's a complicated and mystical fragrance of amber with notes of blackberry, currant, and patchouli. It's a smell like a forest at the foot of a mountain. It is a smell that is all at once inviting, exciting, and comforting.

It is the nape of Samar's neck.

As consciousness invades Liz's brain, she realizes she is nestled against Samar's back, her arms wrapped around her, and her face in the nape of her neck. Liz inhales deeply, and then freezes in mortification as she feels Samar stir in her arms. Liz releases her grasp on Samar and rolls over onto her back.

Liz lies there, perfectly still, taking in the throb in her head and swelling around her eyes. She mentally calculates how quietly she can get up and get to the bathroom for a cool cloth. Or ice. She could slip out to the ice machine. It would feel great just to shove her entire head into a bucket of ice right now.

Samar rolls over and props herself up on an elbow. "You're awake," she says.

"Hey," Liz says. Her lips smile, but her brow furrows in chagrin.

"Good morning," Samar says. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. Embarrassed, but fine."

"There is nothing to be embarrassed about."

"I beg to differ," Liz says. She tries to play back the previous night, but only gets the sense of dizziness, of swirling underwater.

"Then we can agree to disagree," Samar says. She sits up and stretches, turning her back to Liz, who notices that Samar had taken off her sweater the night before and is wearing a beige cami that is low cut in the back and reveals a lush oval of skin the color of almond butter.

"How did you know?" Liz asks Samar's back, as she watches her stretch; fine bones rippling under her skin. "How did you know to come?"

"Liz, you called me. You don't remember?" Samar turns her head to look at Liz with a worried and surprised expression.

"No." Liz searches her memory for pieces of the previous night, coming up only with shards that flash like silver fish scales in her mind. "I mean, I remember waking up in a panic and reaching for my phone but thinking there was no one I could call."

"Well, you called me," Samar says. She turns and takes Liz's hand. The crisis has made her more bold. "I'm glad you did."

"Samar, I'm sorry I troubled you. I feel awful."

"Well, you shouldn't. My phone rang, and I picked it up, but there was nothing but muffled noises. I was worried. After what you'd told me about feeling like you were being followed, I thought. . . well, it doesn't really matter what I thought. Suffice to say, it was a relief to find you here alone, although I feel terrible about what you seemed to be going through. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not particularly," Liz sighs. She drags her body out of bed and starts to make coffee in the tiny pot on top of the mini fridge. "This thing makes pretty crappy coffee, I'm warning you."

"Changing the subject, Keen?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Um, yeah," Samar says. She rubs at her face. She feels puffy from just waking, but not nearly as puffy as Liz looks from the hours of crying the night before. Samar swings her legs over the edge of the bed and stands up. She slept in her jeans, although she did remove her boots, jacket, and sweater. She stands and grabs for her sweater. Liz's back is turned. "I'm worried about you, Liz."

"Don't be."

"Does that happen often?"

"I don't know. Not really. You don't need to be worried about me. I'll be fine." Liz turns to find Samar staring intently at her with eyes still dusky and hooded from sleep. Samar continues to stare at her, pursing her lips and crossing her arms over her chest. "Samar. I think it was just an anxiety attack. I had a bad dream and I woke up in a rough way. I'm totally fine. See?" She spreads her arms open

wide and smiles. Samar does not return the smile, but does take a step closer.

"What you've been through," she begins, but Liz cuts her off and holds up a hand.

"Samar, please."

"No, Elizabeth," Samar snaps. "You 'please.' I was frightened. I came here thinking god-knows-what was happening to you last night. Look. You don't owe me any explanation," she sighs. "But will you please go check in with your doctor?"

Liz steps up to Samar and puts her hands on her arms. "I'm sorry I frightened you," she says, looking up into Samar's face. "And, I'm sorry for being flip. It was thoughtless of me. After everything you have done for me these past weeks, I'm so sorry."

"Please don't apologize," Samar says. She collects Liz to her in an embrace. They stand, holding onto one another as the coffee pot gurgles. She feels Liz relax against her, as she did the night before, and the sense of her yielding in Samar's arms makes Samar's legs tremble.

She struggles to keep her breath slow and steady. A chill and a flush course through her simultaneously, and she is thankful she had put her sweater back on as she feels her nipples harden. Her hands wander up and down Liz's back, and one of them comes up to rest on the back of her neck. She inhales the scent of Liz's hair and finds herself pressing her lips on her temple. She is momentarily horrified that she has taken this liberty, but Liz is still in her arms and has not stiffened or pulled away. She allows her fingers to tuck Liz's hair behind her ear and then she whispers, "It is enough that you are alright."

As they part, Liz is startled to find a tear streaming down Samar's cheek. She reaches up and cups her face, using her thumb to wipe away the tear. She pulls Samar's face towards hers and they rest their foreheads against one another. Their shoulders rise and fall with their breath. "I'm so sorry," Liz whispers. "Thank you for coming, Samar. I thought I was dying and then you were here and I. . ." Liz fumbles for words to express how she felt rescued and cared for, how the closeness of Samar's arms has made her feel protected and calm. But she can't find a way to organize all of those words, so she says, "I'll talk to the doctor. I will."

"Thank you," Samar says.

They part and Liz turns to pour coffee into a couple of yard sale mugs. "But Samar?"

"Yes?"

"Could we keep this between you and I?" Liz hands a mug to Samar. "I mean, I don't want the guys at the task force knowing that I totally was off my rocker. I'm desperate to get back to work, and I don't want this to set me back."

"Of course," Samar says. She wouldn't dream of breaking Liz's trust, and will honor her promise to not tell Cooper or the others at the

Post Office. But she scowls into her coffee when Liz is not looking, because she knows there is someone to whom she absolutely must disclose this event. The thought of it creates a tightness in her chest. She takes an impulsive gulp of her coffee and it is too hot and it burns her tongue and throat going down.

End
file.